



CLEAN RIVER KENT CAMPAIGN

Background Information: JUNE 2024

1. INTRODUCTION TO CRKC

The Clean River Kent Campaign (CRKC) is a coalition of communities living along the river Kent, including Staveley, Burneside, Kendal, Sedgwick, Levens and Grange.

Our aim is to make the river Kent clean for all types of water-based recreation and to protect the ecology and wildlife in the river by working with local communities.

CRKC is co-ordinated by a volunteer steering group, and we now have over 160 volunteers on our mailing list. We have worked hard to engage with our local communities and their representatives. People tell us how much they love the river, and how concerned they are about the current levels of pollution – mainly caused by poor agricultural practice, sewage discharges into the river, and poorly maintained septic tanks.

The campaign has received funding from a wide range of sources including District, Town and Parish Councils, local organisations (such as a Community Energy Company and a Folk Festival), grant giving bodies, groups such as the Women’s Institute and Rotary Club in return for guest speaker talks, as well as individual donations and a crowd funder.

2. WHY DO WE EXIST?

CRKC was established in Autumn 2021, triggered by two illustrations of the threats to the river Kent:

- The first was the major fish kill in Kendal in July 2021. Almost 3 years on this is still being investigated by the Environment Agency with no public report yet available.
- In addition, that summer there were growing concerns about sewage discharges in the streets of Staveley and at Staveley Wastewater Treatment Works (WwTW). A parish councillor took the initiative to buy a kit and test the river water above and below the

WwTW; he found that the water appeared to be heavily contaminated with E. coli below but not above the WwTW.

The river Kent in Cumbria is a beautiful upland river, located in a world heritage site (the Lake District National Park), and much loved by local people. The river Kent is designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) at a national level and a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) at a European level because of the unique ecology including freshwater pearl mussels, white clawed crayfish, and bullhead. It is monitored by Natural England. Their latest summary shows that at each of their 14 monitoring locations the quality of the river water is Unfavourable and Not Improving.

3. WHAT HAS CRKC DONE – CITIZEN SCIENCE

One of our main objectives has been to undertake citizen science to find out more about where and how the river is polluted so we can campaign effectively. We have brought together our results together with other available data into a [CRKC interactive map of the river Kent](#). This is enabling us to identify hot spots, where further action is indicated.

Below is list of the volunteer citizen science we have undertaken to date:

3.1 Measuring faecal bacteria (2021)

Jonty Harte, a student at the University of Cumbria, undertook a study of the river Kent for his degree thesis. He found that the levels of E. coli increased from very low between Scroggs Bridge above Staveley, to a little higher just south of Staveley, to very high below Staveley Wastewater Treatment Works (WwTW).

[Summary of Jonty Harte's dissertation](#) (Full report available on request)

3.2 Measuring faecal bacteria (2022)

CRKC sampled the river Kent at 6 locations between Staveley and Sedgwick to measure the levels faecal pathogens. At each location we found that the levels of E.coli and Enterococcus spp were so high that the Environment Agency would have classified the quality of the water as “Inadequate”, the worst category set out in the Water Framework Directive.

[CRKC Results of River Water Sampling report](#)

3.3 Measuring nitrates, phosphates & ecology (2023 - present)

We are currently measuring the levels of nitrates and phosphates in the river water at 23 locations on the river Kent and its main tributaries – the Gowan, the Mint and the Sprint. This is a 12-month study within the Freshwater Watch framework and will be

completed in September 2024. The study also includes measuring turbidity and making systematic observations at each location.

[CRKC Freshwater Watch results so far – presentation](#)

3.4 Measuring sources of faecal bacteria – human/ruminants (May 2024 - onwards)

We have just started a new study in collaboration with the University of Sheffield. This will involve microbial source tracking to understand better the sources of the E. coli which we know are present in the river. We will take samples above and below both Staveley and Kendal WwTWs. The DNA of the E. coli will be analysed using a PCR technique to attribute the DNA to either humans or to other animals eg sheep or cows. The results should be available by December 2024.

[University of Sheffield MST research proposal – CRKC](#)

3.4.1 Sewage discharge monitoring – Staveley (2023)

CRKC supported Staveley with Ings Parish Council in monitoring the frequency of sewage discharges at Staveley WwTW.

[Report of discharges from Staveley WwTW](#)

4. WHAT HAS CRKC DONE – APPLICATION FOR BATHING WATER STATUS

Our application to Defra in 2022 was rejected as we did not have 100+ swimmers at any single location (drafted for beaches rather than upland rivers). We undertook a survey as part of the application. This found strong support for both application and campaign among our local communities. [CRKC Application for Bathing Status.](#)

We are campaigning for new criteria which better reflect the way in which people access the river Kent eg walking or cycling to a local swimming spot, rather than congregating in large numbers. We are also in discussion about including a “blue space” in the plans which are being developed for a nature park and sports facilities around Sandy Bottoms in Kendal. As part of this we would apply for bathing water status, probably in 2025.

5. WHAT CRKC HAS DONE – OTHER ACTIVITIES

We have actively campaigned since our inception:

- We have used the results of our Citizen Science programme to illustrate and explain our concerns about the river Kent.
- We have worked with the media to secure slots on TV, radio and written publications; we have a website and a presence on social media.
- We have lobbied United Utilities and have been part of a successful campaign with Staveley with Ings Parish Council to secure substantial investment (2025-30) in an

integrated plan for Staveley and Staveley WwTW to stop sewage being discharged into the river and on to the village streets.

- We have worked with other agencies including the Environment Agency and Natural England to make the case that their plans must also prioritise the need to improve the quality of the river Kent as an SSSI.
- We have networked with the national leading-edge organisations to tackle river pollution and have developed working links with other local river campaigns.
- We have taken part in practical action to clean up the riverbanks, and in local events where we can promote our campaign.
- We have fund raised actively and are grateful to all our supporters. As a policy, to retain our independence to speak out, we do not accept funding from the water industry or from those organisations which they fund.

6. WHAT CRKC WILL DO – OUR 2024 ACTION PLAN

We held a Planning Event on 2 March 2024 and agreed the following priorities for 2024:

- Continue our **citizen science programme** by completing the nutrient testing programme (with Freshwater Watch) and the Microbial Source Tracking Project (with the University of Sheffield); and design the next phase of the programme based on our results, through learning from others, and taking account of proposed changes including United Utilities investment.
- Raise the importance of the health of our local rivers in the **General Election**, including by organising a husting to which all Parliamentary candidates will be invited, and by briefing local stakeholders and communities on the issues. A successful husting with 6 of the 8 official Parliamentary candidates and 100+ attendees took place on 12 June 2024.
- Apply to Defra for **bathing water status** at a stretch of the river Kent including Sandy Bottoms. We plan to work with local councils and other partners to submit the strongest possible application. At the same time, we will illustrate that, whilst the revised Defra guidelines requiring a minimum of 100 people swimming at the proposed location on at least 2 days during the bathing season may be appropriate for coastal beaches and lakeside venues, they are not fit for purpose for most upland rivers such as the river Kent.
- Develop a new programme of **engagement with the river**. This will be a creative venture which will reflect both the emotional attachment which many people have to the river Kent, and the benefits which a river can bring for both mental and physical health.
- Continue to **engage actively with our stakeholders** – all those individuals and organisations who have responsibilities to improve the health of the river, our local communities and those who represent us, and those with expertise and experience in river health. CRKC will be a member of the Staveley Clean Water Clean Streets Group, and of the Kent Working Group.
- We will amplify our messages with a strengthened communications strategy building on our successes to date in securing TV, radio and print coverage of the campaign.

- **Review progress** through the year, ensuring that problems are resolved, key opportunities are taken, and that we use our resources as effectively as possible.